

Perfect Institutions

In pretty much every major city in this country, there's a Hollister Co. clothing store — there are over 500 of them in all. Walk inside and it's like being transported: the windows are shuttered so they control the light, the entrance has an L-shaped route so that you don't catch a hint of the outside world, the floors and ceilings have been replaced with new patterns, thumping music controls the sound, special scents are pumped into the air to control what you smell. An attractive young person greets you at the door. You're in a different world.

And, to a first approximation, this new world is perfect. Sure, if you search hard, maybe you can find a ruffled edge on a shirt somewhere, but it's hardly enough to spoil the illusion. And this is what strikes me: that in every major city, in this deeply-flawed country, you can find a little bit of perfection.

No one person, I am sure, can accomplish this kind of perfection. Think about yourself being responsible for creating such a place. Surely there's some part of it you're not capable of doing — do you know where to find the perfect music and the perfect scent and someone to tile the ceiling and someone to take a perfect photograph for the wall and on and on? And even if you are that kind of heroic generalist, who can handle all of that, could you maintain it without flagging, day after day, without loosening your standards, without giving in to the exhaustion that maintaining such a perfect appearance takes? OK, perhaps you have more willpower than I — but unless you're Amy Goodman, even you must take ill sometimes, must have a family emergency to attend to, or *something!* Nobody's perfect, right?

And yet, here they are, five hundred stores of perfection. (You may detest what they are perfect at, but that's not my point. The point is that they have a vision and make it stick.) How do they do it?

"It's obvious," you say. "They don't just have one person — they have a whole bunch. When one falls down on the job, or skips out sick, the others pick up the slack." But those others are imperfect too. It seems far from preordained that a bunch of imperfection combines to create the perfect — it seems just as plausible that combining imperfect people causes the imperfections to multiply, that the whole is far less than the sum of its parts (I'm sure we've all been in such situations).

The difference between these two fates — between people's imperfections canceling each other out versus amplifying each other — is institutions, the social structures that guide people in their actions. Hollister seems gifted with an amazing set of institutions. I don't know the details, but we can imagine them: Everyone must show up for their shift an hour early. If you don't show, a manager calls in a replacement. The managers keep an eye on your performance and if you don't do a good enough job folding shirts, you're reprimanded or replaced. Perhaps a roving "brand protection squad" goes around ensuring local managers are upholding the high national standards. And on and on. Every failsafe has a failsafe.

If you've ever tried building an organization yourself, you know how hard it is to get something like this right. And yet the world is filled with organizations that seem to do it effortlessly. This is the paradox [at the heart of Kafka's *The Trial*](#) and it's one that continues to astonish me. How do they do it? And how come no one else is curious about the details of their success?

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

June 8, 2012